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SUBJECT: THIS WEEK IN ALBANIA, MAY 3-9, 2008

11. (U) The following is a weekly report prepared by Embassy Tirana's local staff to provide political and economic context and insight into developments in Albania.

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POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS  
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12. (U) TAKE A STAND AGAINST CORRUPTION: USAID released its annual survey this week tracking the perception and experience of corruption by Albanian citizens. The news was unfortunately not good. According to the survey, 92% of Albanians say corruption is widespread among public officials, eight points higher than a year ago. The report shows no progress on bribery indicators. Nearly 70% of people surveyed report paying a bribe for medical treatment. Nearly 60% have little or no trust in the judicial system. By a three to one margin, Albanians do not think that judges are impartial when conducting trials.

13. (U) Ambassador Withers released the results of the report with a tough-love speech, urging Albanian citizens not to accept corruption in their daily lives and to actively hold their leaders accountable for corrupt activities. He called on political elites to show leadership, including by lifting immunity from criminal investigation for high level officials. The speech gained wide attention in the local media and among Albanian leaders. President Topi basically concurred, saying that institutions should begin by admitting corruption as a step toward cleaning it up. Opposition leader Edi Rama released a statement from his Socialist Party even more strongly endorsing the Ambassador's suggestions. The Prime Minister's office remained largely silent on the issue, although both he and Speaker Topalli expressed satisfaction with the speech at a NATO ambassadors lunch with the Ambassador.

14. (U) MAKE LOVE NOT WAR: Thousands of communist-era bunkers still litter and disfigure the Albanian landscape, one of the first things a first-time visitor to Albania notices. Leftovers of a bygone era, the bunkers cover fields, beaches, playgrounds, and backyards, and even crop up in cemeteries, a literally concrete legacy of the paranoid imagination of Albania's communist dictator, Enver Hoxha. As many as 700,000 to 1 million of these cement and iron monsters were built between 1950 and Hoxha's death in 1985, designed to repel the threat of foreign invasion. Over the years, bunkers grew not only in number but also in size, built in the beginning to shelter two individuals carrying light weapons, but later to accommodate up to 15 individuals with heavier weapons.

15. (U) One bunker was built for every four Albanians during the communist era, while housing remained scarce. Following Albania's 1978 split with communist China, the country was in dire economic straits and the bunkers became a serious financial burden due to the large amount of concrete and steel used. Since the fall of communism in 1991 they have abandoned their military duty to become a choice venue for lovers' trysts and, in more desperate cases, homes for internally displaced people. Many have been primitively dismantled to claim the bunkers' steel bars for resellable scrap

metal. In recent years bunkers in the major urban areas have become less visible with the continuous transformation of the Albanian landscape, and these alternative uses have been left aside. One remaining legacy has been a 2003 movie entitled "Colonel Bunker," chronicling the bunkerization of the nation and the psychology of isolation that it conveyed. As for the enemies that never came, Albania is already allied with most of them in the democratic era.

¶6. (U) BAPTISM BY FIRE: When the prototype bunker was finished in the 1950s, leader Enver Hoxha asked the chief engineer how confident he was that it could withstand a full assault from a tank. His answer was "very confident." The Communist Party chair then insisted that the engineer stand inside his creation while it was bombarded by a tank. Luckily for him, but sadly for history, the shell-shocked engineer emerged unscathed and his look-out posts went into production on a massive scale.

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THIS WEEK IN ARTS AND CULTURE  
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¶7. (U) Earlier this week an exhibition to promote Albanian cultural heritage opened at the Parliament building. The event was organized by the Parliamentary Speaker, Jozefina Topalli, in conjunction with the Center for Albanian Studies, in honor of European Week. The display includes traditional clothing from the northern and southern regions of Zadrima, Lunxheria, Laberia. While predominantly red and black, the Albanian national colors, the costumes also include a variety of colors and styles that can be found in table covers, scarves, hairbands, and other decorative items. This is part of an effort to provide a complete picture of the cultural heritage and characteristics of regional cultural development in Albania.

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THE WEEK AHEAD  
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¶8. CAPSTONE COMES TO ALBANIA: Seventeen generals and admirals will visit Tirana next week to gain a comprehensive understanding of issues in Albania by meeting with military and civilian leaders, NGOs and international organizations. They will be briefed by OSCE, UNDP, the Parliamentary Committee on National Security, and other major actors and will visit Albania's Rapid Reaction Brigade, which provides the troops to Iraq. This is an important career development program for U.S. senior military officers that gives them insight into foreign policy and foreign relations beyond the usual military confines. Albania is pleased to welcome the visit.

WITHERS